

The Way in which the Advent of the Law Prepares our Hearts for the Advent of Christ

A Provisional Interpretation of Romans 7 & 8

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(Scriptures quoted are from the New Revised Standard Version)

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ... The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”(Mark 1:1-3, 7-8).

“Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” Galatians 3:24-26).

For most of my life, I have wrestled with myself and with God in an effort to live up to the ideals I have imagined. In the process, I have experienced much inner conflict as I attempted to control various desires, inclinations, and emotions in deference to these ideals. And all too often I have found myself despairing – or tempted to despair – due to the discrepancy between the ideal which I had in mind and the actual reality – on the ground, so to speak – of how far I fell short (or seemed to be falling short) of the mark that I set for myself or felt had been set for me by God.

Such inner conflict is part of the human condition and is most intense, perhaps, when the ideal that we are pursuing is understood to be not merely our own, but God’s; and to pertain not merely to something which is of finite and temporary significance, but to the *ultimate* and *eternal wellbeing* of our souls. Some classic texts on this type of conflict are to be found in the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament -- in Romans 7, for example, and in Galatians 5:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15).

“what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want” (Galatians 5:17).

I first became familiar with these texts as a teenager and have thought about them often over the years. Now in my 50s, I have been reading and reflecting once again on these same texts and would like to share some of my tentative conclusions. To start with, I want to suggest, at least provisionally, that

- The conflict described in Romans 7 is different from that described in Galatians 5.
- The conflict in Romans 7 can and must be transcended through faith in Christ (as documented in Romans 8).
- The conflict in Galatians 5 is not entirely transcended in this life (or may not be).
- The conflict in Galatians 5 is not inconsistent with the deliverance described in Romans 8.

In other words, when the conflict in Romans 7 is transcended, by grace through faith, it gives way to a different kind of conflict that in no way diminishes the deliverance which is described Romans 8. I will distinguish between these two types of conflict as follows:

1. Romans 7 describes a kind of “tug of war” between the “flesh” and the “spirit” (small “s”).
2. Galatians 5 describes a kind of oscillation between the “flesh” and the “Spirit” (capital “S”).

A Closer Look at Romans 7 & 8

St. Paul documents the first of these conflicts – the tug of war – and the way in which it can and must be transcended in Romans 7 & 8. But it is not at all easy to determine how, precisely, the transition between the struggle (described in Romans 7) and the apparent deliverance (described Romans 8) unfolds, and what, in the final analysis, is the relationship between the two. However, the following seems to be the case:

- The struggle described Romans 7, under the law, is in some sense *necessary* but not *sufficient* to give rise to the standpoint of grace described in Romans 8.
- Those who struggle in this way fail to live up to God’s standard through their own efforts.
- Those who struggle in this way must in some sense “die” and then be “raised” in newness of life.

The dynamic being discussed, here, is very complex, and there is much room for confusion and misunderstanding. What is undeniable, however, is that Romans 7 portrays a man who conceives of himself as a separate and discrete individual attempting to fulfill an ideal of righteousness by dint of his own efforts and according to his own understanding of that which is the law demands. It becomes clear, however, by the end of the chapter, that his efforts are doomed to failure and he is without hope before God. Indeed, in verse 24 he seems to throw up his hands in despair, crying:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ... So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (Romans 7:24-25).

The question in verse 24 is worth a closer look:

“Who will rescue me from this body of death? ...” (7:24).

The excised phrase indicated by the ellipsis offers a response to the question which always strikes me as rather vague (or attenuated) or perhaps a bit premature given it’s positioning in the text:

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25).

In an effort to clarify it, I will risk paraphrasing it – very slightly -- as follows:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God [**who will rescue me**] through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24, 25).

This fits rather nicely with the first two verses of chapter 8:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:1-2)

If this line of thought is warranted, the entire passage can be paraphrased as follows:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God [**who will rescue me**] through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin [**until I am rescued through faith in Jesus Christ**]” (Romans 7:24-25).

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For [**having been rescued through faith**] the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death [**so that you are no longer a slave to the law of sin**]” (Romans 8:1-2)

This reading seems extremely plausible for the following reasons:

1. It is rather obvious that he is *thanking God* because *God* is the one “who will rescue” him “from the body of this death” (7:24-25).
2. It is reasonable to assume that he is no longer “a slave to the law of sin” (7:25) after he is “set free from the law of sin” by “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ” (8:1-2).

If we proceed, then, on the basis of this rather conservative reading of the text, there are still many questions that remain unanswered. For example: What is the nature of this deliverance? What all is involved in our rescue? What are its practical implications? As we attempt to answer these questions, we need to look even more closely at the “tug of war” in Romans 7.

The Pre-Crucifixion Conflict: “flesh” vs. “spirit”

First of all, we should keep in mind that what Paul appears to be saying about himself, speaking in the first person singular in Romans 7:7-25, applies to everyone who is “in Adam” but who also struggles with sin, in deference to some concept of what the righteousness of God demands. Adam, of course, is the archetype of fallen humanity:

“...all die in Adam” (I Corinthians 15:22).

“...sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses” (Romans 5:12-14).

While most of us have never attempted to keep the Law of Moses, *per se*, we may still have been fortunate enough to have passed through -- or to be passing through -- the conflict Paul is describing. His description of this conflict remains relevant for a number of reasons:

1. There is a sense in which *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny* – spiritually speaking – such that each individual who is being conformed to the image of God must pass through certain essential (archetypal) stages on their journey from (bearing the image of) Adam to (bearing the image of) Christ, even if only briefly or in attenuated fashion.
2. Human beings naturally promote some kind of ethical ideal within their communities and encourage one another – by precept and example -- to cultivate virtue in their lives. And since our *reach*, in this regard, always seems to *exceed our grasp*, there will always be some degree of inner conflict generated as people attempt to come to terms with such ideals. If the ideal is conceived of as *Divine* or *Absolute*, the resulting conflict will necessarily be extremely intense.
3. As we will discuss later, human beings in whom the carnal mind is dominant will always try to reduce the power of the Spirit to a rule or formula that can be adhered to (and imposed on others) in legalistic fashion. This, too, may generate intense inner conflict.

[NOTE: The discussion below will provide additional context for all these claims.]

Thus, the conflict of Romans 7 continues to play itself out in human hearts and minds – even among those who have not lived under the Law of Moses, *per se*. Indeed, as we

shall see, it is this same type of inner conflict that continues to prepare people for the work of grace that constitutes the advent of Christ in their lives.

The Essential Elements of the Conflict

Note that Paul says “sin is not reckoned when there is no law.” It appears that the advent of the law: 1) *brings about a consciousness of sin*, and 2) *arouses our sinful passions* [which are said to “operate” or “work effectively” (*energeo*) in our members through the law” (Romans 7:5)], resulting in our condemnation:

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Romans 7:7-13)

Our knowledge of and respect for the law, in confrontation with the sinful passions which are thereby “aroused” (verse 5) and “shown to . . . sinful beyond all measure” (verse 13), creates a self-stoking cycle of inner conflict which generates an increasingly heightened awareness of sin and also results in a downward spiral of deep despair over our own inadequacy under the law:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? . . . So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (Romans 7:15-23, 25).

At this point, we can enumerate all the essential elements of the conflict: 1) *we delight in the law of God as our ideal*, 2) *we despair over our helplessness to fulfill the law*, but 3) *we refuse to identify with sin which appears exceedingly sinful*:

- “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self” (7:22).
- “I do the very thing I hate . . . Wretched man that I am!” (7:15,24).
- “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it...” (7:20; cf. 7:17).

Together, these elements seem to create a kind of “inner space” or “depth of spirit” within consciousness that makes one ripe for the advent of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is part of what Paul had in mind when he wrote:

“Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” Galatians 3:24-26).

Having become fully aware of sin and the impossibility of our living up to the demands of the law, we are now prepared to hear the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Christ and to begin living and walking in the power of the Spirit.

The Point of Transition: The Cross of Christ

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:1-2).

Having become children of God through faith, we are said to be united with Christ in death (Romans 6:5) and discharged from the law (Romans 7:6). Moreover, our “old self” – or, more literally, our “old man” – is said to have been crucified with him:

“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7).

This makes possible an entirely new kind of life in and through the power of the Spirit.

As reluctant as those who remain caught up in this type of conflict may be to admit it, the hopeless tug of war, outlined in Chapter 7, is transcended through genuine faith in Christ. Whereas, in Romans 7, it was said that *we delighted in the law of God* after “inner man”, but remained *captive to the law of sin and death* which we continued to serve outwardly, in Romans 8, the advent of Christ in our lives is shown to have effectively dealt with sin. At this point it is said that we are *free from the law of sin and death* and that we *can live and walk in the Spirit* and *fulfill the just requirement of the law*:

“God has done what the law . . . could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3-4).

These verses in chapter 8 echo his previous claim, in chapter 3, that

“...now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

Thus, in Galatians, Paul writes:

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19-20).

But while the standpoint in Romans 8, arrived at through faith in Christ, effectively transcends the standpoint articulated in Romans 7, it becomes evident, as we shall see, that *this does not mean that all conflict with the flesh is behind us*. So what’s the difference?

The difference is this: In Romans 7, the “old man” has not been crucified with Christ and “the inner man” referred to in verse 22 is unregenerate. *The “spirit” is willing*, so to speak, *but it remains weak through the flesh* until it is transformed into “Spirit” through faith in Christ. At that point, the conflict between “the flesh” and “the spirit” (small “s”) gives way to a different type of conflict which is between “the flesh” and the “Spirit” (capital “S”). As such, Paul continues to exhort his readers to live and walk in the Spirit, but *the Pre-Crucifixion conflict* is over.

The Post-Crucifixion Conflict: “flesh” vs. “Spirit”

While *the Pre-Crucifixion conflict* is over, the potential for of a new type of conflict is suggested by the following exhortation:

“So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans 8:12-14)

And in Galatians 5, which contains the classic text in which the “works of the flesh” are contrasted to “the fruit of the Spirit”, Paul likewise exhorts the faithful to live in the Spirit:

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

He goes on to describe the conflict between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” in terms that are very similar to those used in Romans 7:

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. (Galatians 5:16)

But while, at first glance, the conflict described in Galatians 5 might be easily confused with that described in Romans 7, there is one very important difference, namely the presence and power of the Spirit. For in contrast to our attempts to conform to the letter of the law, under the old covenant -- which seems, in Romans 7, to originate from outside of us (cf. *heteronomy*) -- under the new covenant, there is a transformation that makes possible the fulfillment of the law which, through the indwelling Spirit, now seems to originate from within us (cf. *autonomy*). The book of Hebrews also highlights this aspect of the new covenant, quoting Jeremiah as follows:

“And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more" (Hebrews 10:15-17; see also Hebrews 8:6-13; cf. Jeremiah 31:33-34).

This dovetails nicely with Paul's affirmation that we are no longer slaves to sin, but *have become obedient from the heart* (Romans 6:17) and also with his description of *the fruit of the Spirit* in Galatians 5:

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians 5:22-23)

So, in contrast to the hopeless “tug of war” in Romans 7, we now learn, in Galatians 5 – just as in Romans 8 – that it is possible, through faith in Christ, to *live and be guided by the Spirit*:

“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24-25).

Not Under Law ≠ A License to Sin

As we have seen, Paul is always at pains to emphasize the preeminence of faith and the futility of adherence to the law, *per se*. At the same time, he insists that this is not a license to sin, but that the righteousness of God will be revealed in us through our faith in Christ:

“But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!” (Galatians 2:17).

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (Romans 6:1-2).

This is a theme which the apostle revisits often (see also Colossians 3 and II Corinthians 5). And while he continuously encourages us in all his letters to cultivate the mind of Christ (cf. Philippians 2:5) and not be weary in well doing (Galatians 6:9), it is also quite obvious – and can hardly be stressed enough -- that in the final analysis, it is impossible for us in our own strength to conform to the standards of God (just as it was impossible for the unregenerate “inner man” to do so under the old covenant, described in Romans 7). Rather, it is the *reality of Christ* that must ultimately *be formed in us* (Galatians 4:19) and it is *Christ* that must ultimately live and bear fruit in our lives (Galatians 2:19-20; 5:22-26; cf. John 15:3-5).

The tension between these two concerns – i.e. the necessity and sufficiency of faith in Christ, on the one hand, and the importance of our diligence, on the other -- and the balance which Paul attempts to strike between them is evident throughout his letters. Consider this exhortation in Philippians, for example, and the one which follows it from Romans 12:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12).

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

We work, indeed, but it is God that works in us. We do not attempt to “conform” to some abstract, legalistic ideal, but we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind” through faith in Christ and by the power of the Spirit. These concerns are echoed elsewhere in the New Testament, as well – in II Peter, for example:

“May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (II Peter 1:2-8)

Insofar as we live and walk in the Spirit, it goes without saying that we will promote Christ-centered ideals within our communities and encourage our young people, especially – by precept and example -- to cultivate virtue in their lives. But this is a tightrope act, of sorts. For while the promotion of such ideals are an essential element of ethical and spiritual discourse, it is almost inevitable, at certain times in our life and within certain communities, perhaps, that such idealist rhetoric will be understood – or *misunderstood* – in a legalistic way. This is not all bad, however, for *even this kind of misunderstanding* – if we are really honest with ourselves before God – can have the same positive function as the Law of Moses, namely, to generate the kind of inner conflict that, by the grace of God, prepares our hearts and minds for genuine faith in Christ. For it by undergoing a period of such inner conflict – however brief or attenuated it may be -- that we too realize our inability to live up to God’s standards through our own strength. Indeed, we learn that our ideals cannot become actual – that virtue cannot begin to be perfected in us – apart from our unconditional faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. For it is only through genuine faith in Christ that our self-will is finally surrendered and the fruit of the Spirit become manifest in our lives as we learn to *abide in Christ* ever more faithfully:

“You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:3-5).

When we truly abide in Christ, we have effectively exchanged *our will* for God’s will. And it is only when “we” *have died*, in this way, *and our life is hidden with Christ in God* (Colossians 3:3) that the joy of salvation is truly realized and we become *obedient from the heart* (Romans 6:17; cf. Hebrews 8:10). Reminiscent of the verses in John 15, quoted above, it is at this point that we begin to

“bear fruit for God . . . not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit” (Romans 7:4,6).

But while the fruit of the spirit will begin to be revealed in us as soon as we genuinely come to know and trust in Christ, it usually takes some time – perhaps even a lifetime – before we are *perfectly* content to rest in Him, alone, who is both our righteousness and our reward. As such, there is another type of conflict with the flesh that continues, but one which plays out in an entirely different way and on an entirely different level – a type of conflict which, over time, becomes more and more transparent (and less and less bothersome) in the light of Christ. Instead of playing a hopeless “tug of war” with the flesh (as in Romans 7), there is, instead, a tendency to alternate between the standpoint of “the carnal mind” and “the mind of Christ.” This new type of conflict is only possible if we already *have the mind of Christ* (II Corinthians 1:16) and have already begun to *live and walk in the power of the Spirit* (Galatians 5).

The “flesh” and the “Spirit” in Oscillation -- Keeping our eyes on the Lord

As indicated above, *the ultimate concern* of those who are born of God is simply to *abide in Christ* and live totally surrendered to the will of God – trusting Him to *work in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure* (Philippians 2:13). The point at which we truly come to know and trust in Christ – recognizing his living presence in our life – is an occasion of great joy. From this point forward, the process of “crucifixion” or “sanctification” has begun. This is the process through which our self-will (i.e. the carnal mind) begins to decrease and *the mind of Christ* becomes ever more prominent in our lives. The end of this process, as far as this life is concerned, is some *degree* of “perfection” or “maturity” characterized by a will which is more fully surrendered to the will of God and a mind which more faithfully and steadfastly *abides in Christ*, resulting in a life which *bears much fruit*.

At the beginning of this process, however, we usually find ourselves frequently alternating between the carnal mind and the mind of Christ – a kind of *oscillation* between two different *gestalts* or *ways of seeing* ourselves and our world. For in spite of – and in some sense because of – our new found joy, it is not at all uncommon for us to begin *imagining a future* in which all will go smoothly – imagining that all should unfold according to “our” expectations. What we fail to appreciate is that by imagining our future in this way, we are forgetting that *the Way of life* is also *the way of the cross*. And by lapsing once again into that mode of thinking which is typical of the carnal mind – imagining ourselves as separate from the body of Christ as a whole; thinking, again, in terms of *our good* and *our evil*; attempting once again to secure *our life* and *our future wellbeing* in a manner unbecoming of a child of God – we have temporarily *laid aside the cross*, so to speak, and have placed our hope, once again, in fortune and circumstance, imagining that we will find completion or fulfillment in this or that *turn of events*. From this *carnal* standpoint, it is inevitable that the apparent trajectory of our life, as we observe it unfolding in space and time, will come into conflict with one or more of our *preferences* – i.e. with our *personal* desires or expectations with respect to *our future* (considered in isolation from our place in the body of Christ and God’s plan for our life). From this standpoint it is inevitable that we will be tempted, once again, to despair. Indeed, at times like these, we can compare ourselves to Peter who, in the gospel story, steps out of his boat and walks out on the water toward Jesus, but then looks away:

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:29-32).

Like Peter, in this passage, we take our eyes off the Lord -- turning away from that *living presence* which is *Christ in us* – and become preoccupied, instead, with the swirling of the wind and waves around us. Perhaps we become obsessed with maintaining complete control over other people in our lives; perhaps we are attempting to anticipate every possible contingency before we trust the Lord’s leading in our circumstances; perhaps we have inadvertently allowed ourselves to become consumed, once again, with

accumulating riches or worldly honors; or perhaps – God forbid! -- we are attempting yet again to achieve (what we imagine to be) spiritual goals through the strength of the flesh! Whatever the case may be, we tend to forget, at times, the futility of looking to anyone but Christ and fail to remember the admonition of the Psalmist:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).

For, indeed, by trusting and abiding in Him, *here and now*, we have access to the water life itself:

"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14)

And as we drink from that eternal spring, which is the living Word of God *in us*, we make contact with a deeper, higher intelligence and receive that anointing of the Spirit that will *guide us into all truth* (John 16:13). Among other things, we learn to interact with others as equals, forging relationships founded on mutual respect and consideration, instead of manipulation or coercion. Moreover, in *the awareness of Divine presence* that is characteristic of *the mind of Christ*, we tend to be intuitively and optimally aware of our circumstances without becoming fearful and obsessive about things which might possibly go wrong. And insofar as the world continues to *appear* threatening, we are prepared to *take up our cross* and embrace God's will for our lives, whatever the turn of events. Over time, we learn that there is nothing to be gained by taking our eyes off the Lord and attending to the wind and waves around us; nothing to be gained by depending on our own efforts instead of the power of the Spirit that is ours through faith in Christ.

Conclusion

The texts in Romans 7 and 8 are difficult and subject to a number of different interpretations. I have suggested that the conflict in Romans 7 prepares the way for the advent of Christ in our lives by creating an "inner space" or "spiritual depth" in which the grace of God can work, generating, among other things, a knowledge of our own helplessness and a willingness to accept the free gift of salvation by grace, through faith. When the free gift is accepted -- when we truly trust in Christ -- the conflict between the "flesh" and the "spirit" is transcended as "the inner man" is regenerated by the power of the Spirit and the "old man" is (or begins to be) *crucified with Christ*. At that point, I have suggested, the conflict with the flesh ceases to be a "tug of war" and becomes instead a tendency to alternate or oscillate between two different *gestalts* – i.e. two different ways looking at the world: either through the perspective of the "carnal mind" OR through *the mind of Christ*. The former perspective *tempts us* to try to manipulate other people in our life as we strive to arrange our circumstances through our own strength and cleverness so as to secure the realization of our temporal hopes and the satisfaction of our personal desires. *The mind of Christ*, however, provides an unflinching

sufficiency through the strength and power of the Spirit and the living Word of God, within us. It is worth noting that this is the same *Divine Spirit* and *Divine Intelligence*, through which the original creation is framed, *in the beginning*, and which is there declared by God to be *very good!* (cf. Genesis 1:31; Hebrews 1:2). Likewise, through *the mind of Christ*, we see beyond the suffering and death of a fallen world and know that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In the words of St. Paul,

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (II Corinthians 4:16-18).

While the perspective of the carnal mind may continue to assert itself, it tends to become more and more transparent in the light of Christ (cf. Ephesians 5:13-14; Hebrews 4:12-13) and we find ourselves increasingly enabled, *Christ-like*, to live and walk in the power of the Spirit. The particular shape this will take, in terms of behaviors and lifestyles can vary widely between individuals (according to their education, temperament, and circumstances) and between communities (depending on the particular culture and subcultures involved). But what is undeniable, however, is the healing power and unconditional love that is to be found in Christ.

Through faith in Christ, we are enabled to respond *in love* to every challenge that presents itself while continuing to live unconditionally, in the presence of God – *here and now* – whatever the turn of events. Through it all, that which needs to be done IS done, through the power of the Holy Spirit. But such *doing* has little in common with the frantic, fearful efforts of the carnal mind. Indeed, those who are addicted to this kind of work – and who may try to infect others with their frame of mind -- should remember one of the simplest and purest expressions of *the mind of Christ* found in scriptures. It is from *the Sermon on the Mount*:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows

that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today (Matthew 6:25 -34).

And while the text does say to “strive”, it is clear that this does not involve the frantic and fearful efforts, alluded to above, or the impotent striving of Romans 7. Rather, the call of Jesus is as follows:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

In contrast to the hopeless “tug of war” with the flesh, in Romans 7, the conflict between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” in Galatians 5 has more to do with the “eye” through which we see the world – the perspective of “the carnal mind” or “the mind of Christ”? As indicated above, these two minds offer two different *gestalts* (or *ways of perceiving* ourselves and the world) and Jesus, too, makes clear that the two are incompatible, using as an example our desire for wealth which is symbolic of the carnal mind’s desire for temporal, material security:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:19-24; cf. Luke 12:15-21).

Likewise, it doesn’t take long to see that “the carnal mind”, as we experience it, is incompatible with *the mind of Christ*. And while that perspective may continue to have a kind of inertia in our lives, it can’t really hold a candle to the abundant life and power of the Spirit which we find in Christ as we continue to grow in grace and knowledge of the truth.

Afterword

For those who are still caught up in the “tug of war” described in Romans 7 OR are having a difficult time shaking the perspective of *the carnal mind* (in deference to *the mind of Christ* with which they are already familiar), what is called for, at this point, is a more detailed exploration of what it means to know and trust in Christ. I am attempting

such an exploration in a related essay entitled, *Getting to Know Jesus in the 21st Century*, which I hope will be finished in the near future. **20120608** **<END>**